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Mature Junior Associates

By Deborah Acker

You made it. You left a relatively good job and an established professional identity with faith in your ability to redefine yourself. You managed to get through law school without getting divorced or reported to Child Protective Services. You performed well enough to get a permanent offer from a top law firm.



Your family is beginning to believe that this plan to go back to law school may actually pay off. You are doing long division to figure out how quickly you can pay off the bottom-line debt figure you received during your exit interview with the financial aid office. You think you probably passed the bar, or you are deep in denial and won't think about it until November. You took a few weeks

off to renew your acquaintance with your spouse and lose a few of the 30 pounds you gained in law school eating nothing but ramen.

It's all downhill from here, right? You know how to be a professional, work hard, negotiate office politics; you've done it before. Becoming a first-year associate is just the beginning of a fabulously successful legal career. What could possibly trip you up now?

Beware. Unique hidden dangers lurk for the "mature" second-career professional when he or she enters the hallowed halls of a top-tier law firm as a junior associate. With a bit of caution and anticipatory guidance, you can step around these potholes or even use them to your advantage. But you must understand how the system works.

First, you have to accept that your professional clock has just been reset to zero. You may have been on the top rung of the ladder in your former professional life. You may have had authority; you may have had people anticipating your needs; your competence may not have been in question. Get over it. Let it go.

Now, at the law firm, your role is to respond to requests instead of making them. You are under the microscope in terms of your work product. You are now the third person sharing a secretary, and your tasks are the lowest priorities on his or her list. This is normal. The sooner you shrug your

shoulders, smile, and put your nose to the grindstone, the happier you will be. Bond with your fellow junior associates, even if you are 20 years older than they are. You all experience the same stresses. They can provide a safe haven for blowing off steam.

Law firms count the days you have worked for them. The date of the first day you work as an "associate," is critical to many decisions that determine the culture of the law firm. Silly things can be a big deal.

Office choice is an example. Office quality is often based on seniority and reflective of status in very subtle ways. In one firm, office status might be based on counting ceiling tiles in order to gauge square footage. The difference between two offices might be invisible at first glance, but if you are an associate who started in October rather than one who started the following January, you may be entitled to an additional six-inch strip of ceiling tiles.

In another firm, bookcases might tell the tale. If you are less than a third-year associate, you might be entitled to a small four-shelf bookcase. Even if there are extra bookcases available and your floor is stacked high with files and banker boxes, you will have to wait until you reach a certain anniversary to get a second or larger bookcase.

Are you going to let this bother you? I would advise having a good sense of humor (and taking a stealth trip to IKEA on the weekend). The point is that you may have come from a work environment that tended to be more egalitarian or less petty in some ways. Don't take issue with this when you are a junior associate; make a "note to self" to consider a new approach when you become a partner and join the management committee.

On a more serious note, as a junior associate, managing your relationships with clients can be tricky. In some firms, you have to earn the "privilege" of speaking directly with



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clients. Senior attorneys worry that stupid advice and gems of malpractice may pop out of your mouth before you develop your expertise and appropriate “legal filters.”

You may need to prove yourself for two or three years before you are given free rein to speak to a client without direct supervision. If you handled client relationships in your previous professional life, this may feel awkward or even punitive. (And in some cases, such as those of junior patent attorneys who actually used to work shoulder to shoulder with the technical clients they now serve, it seems downright silly.) You may be thinking, “I know these people. I know what they do. I speak their language. Who better to interface with them and exchange the information to get the work done?”

However, there is more going on than meets the eye. Client relationships are not just about getting the work done. The attorney who serves as the primary interface between the client and the firm usually is listed as the “responsible attorney” or the “originator” of the work. These designations have huge significance in terms of how a senior attorney’s book of business and potential share of profit are evaluated.

In addition, the attorney speaking to the client is often the one who will be informed of new work or additional matters that might be brought into the firm. It is critical to nurture relationships with partners in your firm—and with senior associates who want to be partners. Thus, although a junior associate may know a client well and actually have a better relationship with him or her, getting too chummy with the client may be perceived as “out of place,” “a bit cocky,” or even threatening.

Of course, when all hands are on deck and there is simply too much work, your ability to step up to the plate and get things done may be well appreciated. But it behooves you to keep the senior attorney in the loop, acknowledge his or her expertise and experience to the client in his or her absence, and avoid taking it personally if you get pushed into the background at times. Your time will come.

Chronological age is not a small issue. When I joined my firm as a first-year associate, I was the same age as most of the well-established partners. This was a mixed blessing. In many ways, I had a lot in common with the partners, as we had negotiated the same history of the times, current events, family situations, and physical aches and pains. I was often invited to social functions when other junior associates were excluded. This had more to do with shared interests than strategic relationships within the firm.

The downside was that I may have been more frequently spared the critical early gut-grinding assignments that can generate appreciation for a junior associate. As a single parent, I was at times protected from sudden requests to fly off to a remote city for a week of document review. But those assignments would have allowed for some cross-pollination with other attorneys in other offices within the firm. And I could have accumulated brownie points and let the clock run and been seen as a great “biller.”

Try not to allow your mature family situation or a sense that you have already paid your dues in your earlier life to protect you from paying the standard junior-associate dues.

Some law firms are more evolved than others in terms of their social systems. You can be yourself more easily in some firms than in others, even if you are a bit atypical as a junior associate. But no matter where you practice, competent hard work and humility will serve you well.

By efficiently generating the highest quality of work, you will reflect your value and your integrity in short order. You will be assigned a better secretary who will support you so that you can do more of what you are doing. You will be noticed by the senior attorneys who value good work. You will become respected within the firm. Before you know it, you will be paraded in front of clients as one of the up-and-coming stars of the firm. You will be on your way. Two to three years of quiet hard work will have paid off. Trying to accelerate this process by expecting your pre-law status to give you a head start will backfire. Be humble in the early days until you earn some respect.

Even with humility and competence, you may encounter a situation that is difficult to reconcile with your fundamental identity as an older adult. In my former life, I had tremendous responsibility, as I directed emergency lifesaving procedures. I would “give orders” (in hospital parlance) and had to demonstrate hands-on competence in very tense situations when lives were at stake.

I was relieved to step back from that kind of stress when I became a lawyer. But as a first-year associate, I did smile when I was told that I had to have every email I wrote “second-attorney reviewed.” It was a level of supervision that contrasted sharply with the responsibilities of my previous professional life. However, I realized there was a good rationale, and I went forward with an openness to learn the proper way to communicate with a client. The policy saved me from committing stupid blunders.



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The challenge came when I was a third- or fourth-year associate. By then, I was ready to resurrect my people skills from my previous life and anxious to integrate my growing legal knowledge and intuition with my previous business experience. Eventually, I arrived at a point where my own perception of my life experience and capabilities could no longer be reconciled with how the law firm viewed me. It was one reason to make a change.

Changing careers is a luxury in many ways. Many people do not have the time or money to even consider the possibility of earning another advanced professional degree. To be successful as a junior attorney, you should not approach your new career with a sense of entitlement. Hard work and humility are the keys to advancement in the early days, regardless of your age or experience.

As you mature into your role as an experienced attorney and reintegrate the sum total of your life experience, do not allow yourself to be defined in a limited way that you know to be inaccurate. If necessary, find the right platform to reach your full potential. But in the early years, keep that nose to the grindstone, remain open to learning, and have a healthy sense of humor.

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